

"Standing still is idle folly,
 Going backward is a crime :
 None should patiently endure
 Any ill that he can cure ;
 ONWARD ! keep the march of Time.
 Onward ! while a wrong remains
 To be conquer'd by the right ;
 While Oppression lifts a finger
 To affront us by his might :
 While an error clouds the reason
 Of the universal heart,
 Or a slave awaits his freedom,
 Action is the wise man's part.

"Lo ! the world is rich in blessings—
 Earth and Ocean, flame and wind,
 Have unnumber'd secrets still,
 To be ransack'd when you will,
 For the service of mankind ;
 Science is a child as yet,
 And her power and scope shall grow,
 And her triumphs in the future
 Shall diminish toil and woe ;
 Shall extend the bounds of pleasure
 With an ever-widening ken,
 And of woods and wildernesses
 Make the homes of happy men.

"ONWARD !—there are ills to conquer,
 Daily wickedness is wrought,
 Tyranny is swoll'n with Pride,
 Bigotry is deified,
 Error intertwined with Thought,
 Vice and Misery ramp and crawl ;
 Root them out, their day has pass'd :
 Goodness is alone immortal ;
 Evil was not made to last :
 ONWARD ! and all Earth shall aid us
 Ere our peaceful flag be furl'd."—
 And the preaching of this Preacher
 Stirs the pulses of the world.

By the Author of this Discourse :—

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CHARACTERISTICS

OF

CHRISTIAN UNITARIANISM:

A SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE

THE MEMBERS OF THE WARWICKSHIRE UNITARIAN TRACT
SOCIETY, AT THEIR ANNUAL MEETING, AT CRADLEY,

24TH AUGUST, 1859.

BY

THE REV. DAVID MAGINNIS.

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1859.

WARWICKSHIRE UNITARIAN TRACT SOCIETY.

At the business-meeting of the Society, held at the close of the service,—FRANK EVERS, Esq., in the chair,—it was moved by the Rev. STEPHENSON HUNTER, of Wolverhampton, seconded by the Rev. SAMUEL BACHE, of Birmingham, and unanimously resolved,—

That the best thanks of this Society be offered to the Rev. David Maginnis, for the truly Christian and eminently instructive Discourse with which he has favoured the Society this morning; and that he be requested still farther to favour the Society with the Sermon for publication.

SAMUEL BACHE, SECRETARY.

CRADLEY, *August 24, 1859.*

CHRISTIAN UNITARIANISM.

“WHEREFORE BY THEIR FRUITS YE SHALL KNOW THEM.”—*Matt.* vii 20.

THE value of a System of Religion is, necessarily, largely affected by its practical influences. In abstract science we could not admit utility as a test of truth. In every department of human inquiry, indeed, we should be prepared, even though unable to discover their uses, to receive whatever doctrines are supported by evidence in all other respects adequate. At the same time, it will be readily conceded that, in regard to a system designed for man's guidance in the concerns of duty, its influences on the heart and conscience must enter largely into the consideration of its importance. If, on examination, we should find such system either devoid of beneficial influences,—its doctrines so subtle and fanciful as to be most difficult of comprehension, and, when comprehended, to be powerless for good; or absolutely injurious, calculated to weaken, rather than strengthen, moral obligation, we should be compelled to condemn it; and, especially, in the latter case. The law of life that fails to promote good morals is, necessarily, inadequate: that which is hostile to morality challenges, and should receive, the strongest reprobation.

How stands our Liberal Christianity in these respects? As a system of religion and morals, what is its value? As a law of life, is it adequate? Is it suited to man's condition? Is it calculated, in any high degree, to promote God's glory and man's well-being? Should our faith be wanting in these respects, nothing can compensate for the defect. An importance, consequently, attaches to the subject suggested by these questions, which not merely justifies, but demands for it, a full investigation. The present Discourse, therefore, I devote to a consideration of some of the characteristics of that system of doctrine which we embrace, with a view to shew its great positive merits, and, relatively, its superior practical influences, as a system of religion and morals.

I. In the first place, Christian Unitarianism is eminently Rational. It addresses itself to the Reason—to the intellectual and moral nature of man. It does not seek to compel assent to its teachings. Its every doctrine, with the evidence on which it rests, it freely submits to the most searching investigation. With the Apostle, it exhorts and entreats men to

“prove all things,” to test its teachings all, and “hold fast” only “that which is good.”

Man has been constituted a rational being, and, as such, he is, therefore, entitled to be regarded and treated. The great Creator has conferred reason upon him, that he may be adequate to enlightened conduct in the affairs of life; and, usually, in such concerns, to reason the appeal is ever. And Unitarianism, in subjecting its doctrines to the investigation and decision of reason, adopts an eminently rational method,—a method not less reverential than rational; for it recognises reason as a divine gift, and applies it to its highest use. In the process there may be error, or even failure; but that the attempt should be made, that reason should be exercised to the utmost, to learn the will divine as contained in the works, providence, and word of God, results, necessarily, from man’s constitution. In appealing to reason, therefore, we hold that Unitarianism merely does what every system of religion should do that claims to rest in any large degree on the divine law.

That a system of religion and morals addresses itself to the reason, may seem small cause for high commendation: and such, indeed, it would be, were it not so rare an attribute of prevailing systems. Turn from our own to whatever Church you will, in all broad Christendom, and you will find that, in matters of religion, to reason a very subordinate place is assigned, if admitted to a place at all. The chances are, you will hear it reviled and repudiated as carnal, proud, deceitful. In all subscribing Churches it is required to yield obedience to the authority of the creed. It is peculiar to Liberal Christianity, that it submits its creed to the scrutiny of reason. And we hold that, under these circumstances, it is no small commendation of our Church, that it alone fully recognises the function of reason in the sphere of religion.

The practical influence of this characteristic of our faith must be very considerable, both upon its professors and also upon the members of other Churches. It is scarcely possible that men should not be more rational in conduct as they become more rational in thought. There may not always be that close connection we could desire between right-thinking and right-doing; at the same time, it is only on the foundation of divine law, rightly apprehended, that a solid and enduring character of virtue can be raised: all else is but “wood and hay and stubble.”

In its action upon other communions, the influence of our faith is admitted.* I do not mean in making proselytes to our Church. It does not seem that, practically, the reasonableness of a Church’s doctrine is any guaranty of a Church’s popularity. It would rather seem, that the more mysterious and unintelligible a system is, the more acceptable it is likely to be. In numbers our Church has not increased largely. Nor do I expect that it ever shall. Not that I have not faith in our principles. I have faith in them the fullest. I see in them the conditions of a Church Universal. It appears to me, however, that existing Churches will gradually

* The *British Quarterly* admits that though modern Unitarianism “has not added much to the bulk of avowed Unitarians, it has done much as an influence. As a complexion of thought, tending to affect the opinions of reading men, it is widely diffused.”

advance towards us by their own growth and development. Proselytes from other denominations will, no doubt, continue to be added to our Church. But its success is not to be measured by the number of its converts. Its work seems to be to rationalize rather than proselytize. In the exercise of that function it has already made itself felt. It is notorious that the orthodoxy of the present day is much more rational than the orthodoxy of five-and-twenty years ago. Its advocates have changed their ground ; and generally,—at least the more educated,—aim at making their defences rational and philosophic. The increased enlightenment of the times demands this. And to that enlightenment the principles of our Church have contributed largely. The most influential portion of the literature of the day, from the cheap weekly publication to the elaborate quarterly, is deeply imbued with those principles, whilst they are, at the same time, leavening all the Churches of the Reformation. In these results we have the assurance that the Churches are not insensible to the appeal to reason : we have, also, the earnest, the pledge, of further progress ; and, consequently, look forward hopefully for the time when reason shall be generally recognised in its highest function as the heaven-ordained interpreter of the divine will.

From the characteristic of our faith we have been noticing, some corollaries of considerable importance may be deduced.

1. In its doctrines, it must be easily understood. To be rational it must be intelligible. This is necessarily an important requisite in any system intended for general reception. In putting forward this claim for Liberal Christianity, it must not be inferred that I mean to assert that it disallows all that it cannot comprehend. Were we to believe only in what we fully comprehended, we should believe in nothing. We are surrounded by mysteries we cannot fathom. Life, death, vegetation, existence, thought, the soul, eternity, God,—who can understand these ? No, not mysteries do we refuse to believe in ; but attempted solutions thereof, that are self-contradictory and absurd,—opposed to that reason which God has given to guide us in the acquisition of wisdom.

2. In spirit, Unitarianism must be perfectly tolerant. To be rational, a system must be tolerant. Looking out upon society, it discovers endless variety of intellectual capacity, subject to as various influences. And it were in the highest degree irrational to expect aught else than endless variety of experiences, and, consequent thereon, of modes of thinking, of opinion. Our Church, moreover, affirms the right of private judgment ; and, consequently, it were the height of folly to be angry with those, who, in the exercise of that right, have arrived at conclusions different from our own. We do not, therefore, feel at liberty to set up our own convictions, however sound and important we may deem them, as an orthodox rule for others. We have no church-list of fundamental articles, of saving dogmas, profession of which we make necessary to church-membership. Amidst “diversities of gifts,” we aim at securing—not uniformity of opinion, but—“unity of spirit.”

Such, then, are the nature and tendencies of the first characteristic of our system of faith. It appeals to the reason. It recognises the function

of reason in religion, so generally ignored or disparaged by popular theologians. It tends to rationalize thought, simplify doctrine, and promote toleration.

II. In the second place, Christian Unitarianism is distinguished by its doctrine of the Fatherly Character of God. Not that orthodox Churches deny that doctrine: it is set down in their creeds and articles for belief,—but with such limitations as leave the heart and conscience unsatisfied. But in Liberal Christianity the doctrine has a reality, a consistency, a significance, which we seek for in vain in popular creeds. It teaches that God is, indeed, “Our Father”—all-wise and all-good. If it be “the first and great commandment” of the Saviour’s law, to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind, we have in this doctrine the reason of the command and the strongest motive to obedience,—in fact the power of obedience. Only let the idea be fully realized, that God is our Father, wise, tender and loving,—and without further reasoning we love him,—spontaneously, purely, supremely. We love him,—not from the hope of benefit to be thereby gained, nor even from a sense of duty,—but from the heart’s own impulse. The child needs no logical argument to convince it to love the tender mother whose affections are its sun and shield. But let the mother’s affections wane, and her character become less amiable, and the child’s affection also wanes. Systems of religion that represent the Almighty as partial in his government, rewarding and punishing without any regard to character, in so far as they are received, render the first great commandment of Christ impracticable. Calvinism, in particular, by its representation of the character and government of God, renders spontaneous love unnatural and impossible. Liberal Christianity restores the condition essential to genuine love of God. The character in which it presents the Divine Being awakens affection; it unites us to him in love. And if we love him sincerely, then we shall delight to walk in his ways, to keep his commandments. And is not this a most important practical influence our principles exercise? And Christian Unitarianism exerts that influence beyond other systems of faith, as far as the character of the God it reveals excels that of the God of orthodoxy,—as far as the character of a Father, wise, righteous, and good, is morally superior to that of a Sovereign, austere, partial and cruel.

Furthermore,—the wisdom and the rightness of the heart’s impulse in loving God supremely, rendered possible by Liberal Christianity, reason fully justifies. In its feeble attempts to learn something of the ways of Providence in the world, reason discovers enough to satisfy the judgment that God’s throne is fixed in righteousness, supported by laws of unchanging rectitude, “the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.” And man learns, besides loving, to trust in God, unwaveringly. Popular systems weaken this ground of confidence, by representing God as changeable, capricious,—to-day enacting laws which, to-morrow, he may suspend or repeal. But, according to our views, “God is not a man that he should change, nor the son of man that he should repent.” We hold with the Apostle that, with God, there “is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” So

that, by the assistance of reason, the impulse of the heart is converted into an abiding confidence; the love of God becomes a rational and deep-rooted trust in his providence and government.

In accordance with these views, the Unitarian, who is actually animated by their spirit, feels worship to be a pleasure, a delight. It is not a penalty, nor a penance, nor a bribe. It is the willing but reverential, and, in view of his own unworthiness, contrite, communion of the child with the Great Parent—the object of supreme love and unshaken confidence. In such circumstances, worship is indeed a delight. Even where we have but shortcomings to acknowledge, and sins to deplore, the soul feels relief in its confessions before the throne of its heavenly Father; just as the child, unless hardened by transgression, cannot enjoy peace, until, with tears of contrition, it confesses its fault to its parent in the flesh. And even then, how much so-ever abased on account of unworthiness, slavish fear is not the fitting feeling to accompany us into our heavenly Father's presence. Love and trust should still possess the soul; and, as sunshine through the storm, beautify and gladden what otherwise were cheerless and saddening.

In regard to this second characteristic of our faith, we would only observe, further, that it exhibits the Divine Being in that aspect in which the Saviour most delighted to present him. The Fatherly Character of God shines out everywhere, as a central truth of the Gospel of his Son.

III. Christian Unitarianism is an eminently Practical System. While it commends right feeling and right thinking, its highest praise is for right doing. Beautiful theories may be right enough, but a divine life is above all else. Profession of religion may be proper enough, but what our principles require is practice. The truly orthodox are they whose heart and life are right before God. The only entrance to blessedness is on the path of purity, self-sacrifice, and obedience. In this respect, our Liberal Christianity stands alone amid the creeds of Christendom. All others dispense with personal virtue, in a great degree, as a condition of salvation. They detract from the importance of a holy life, making it of minor consequence. According to them, faith is the key that opens heaven. Deeds of righteousness and labours of love are but "filthy rags." Their doctrine is, Only believe, and you will be clothed in robes of purity meet for the courts above. The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England declare that—"We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith; and not for our own works or deservings: wherefore, that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine and very full of comfort" (Art. xi). The Westminster Confession, the creed of the Church of Scotland and other Calvinistic sects, teaches that "Faith, . . . receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the" only "instrument of justification;" and "the principal acts of saving faith (which is itself a gift,) are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life" (Chaps. xi., xiv). And Methodism is not

behind these systems in magnifying faith and depreciating virtue. Sinners, all defiled and corrupted with sin, are made sure that by an exercise of faith they can be washed pure and clean in Jesus' blood, and instantaneously become fit to reign with saints in glory. Now, this may be a very "comfortable" doctrine; it may be very pleasant to feel that, sin as we may, a single act of faith will purify our souls in the sight of God; but I question much whether it is a "wholesome" doctrine,—nay, I am convinced that so far from its being "wholesome" in its influences, it necessarily tends to encourage the practice of sin, and to produce an inferior moral character.

Unitarianism has not yet been able to discover any substitute for a holy life. It takes its stand, therefore, for virtue. Faith it does not despise. No, faith it cherishes,—faith in all that is good and true,—faith in God, in Christ, in man. But faith is only a means to an end—a divine life. Without this, faith is a very poor thing. "Faith without works is dead." The great aim of Liberal Christianity, therefore, is to make men righteous and holy. It cares little for cant: it never mistakes the phylactery for piety: it may listen to professions, but it imperatively enjoins practice. "If thou wilt enter into life keep the commandments." "Not every one that saith unto me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven."

IV. Another characteristic of our principles is the Enormity with which they invest Personal Transgression. By this I do not mean to imply that sin is represented as a trifling thing by popular creeds; for they teach that the very first sin committed brought ruin upon the world, and rendered necessary the incarnation and death of God's own equal. Yet, while this one sin was fraught with results so awful, it does not appear, according to these systems, that the personal transgressions of the descendants of Adam are of very serious consequence. They may be easily effaced. Faith in the atoning sacrifice washes out every stain of guilt. So that to man, whatever it was in the case of Christ, sin is not so very serious a thing. Not so, however, with our faith. We do not believe that there exists any spiritual charm which can instantaneously obliterate from the soul the traces of any transgression. We hold that "whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." The righteous judge of the world "will render to every man according as his deeds have been." There is a truth of solemn significance in the words of Christ respecting such as have wandered from the paths of duty and been taken in the snares of sin: "Thou shalt by no means come out thence till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing." Every sin we commit is an irreparable loss. Though, through God's great mercy, the sinner is permitted and encouraged to return, and by newness of life may attain salvation; yet, for our every sin we shall bear the punishment due thereto. Though taken tenderly to his kind Father's bosom and forgiven, and admitted to all the comforts of home, the consequences of the prodigal son's early life were not obliterated. "He that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption." "Be sure your sin will find you out."

V. The doctrines of Unitarianism respecting Human Nature are eminently calculated to produce the best results in man's moral and religious culture. We have faith in human improbability. We believe that every human being possesses within himself the germs of endless growth in virtue,—a growth which he has it in his own power greatly to promote or retard. Though we believe that in all men there are also tendencies to evil, we do not believe that in any case, much less that in every case, man is thereby incapacitated for doing good. Admitted that these tendencies are often strong, we hold, nevertheless, that, in every case, they may be brought under the control of reason and conscience; and that, though the struggle may often be severe and protracted, “the lusts of the flesh” must yield to the law of the spirit. To those who will, therefore, all things are possible,—according to this doctrine. It lays no barrier on the road to heaven. Not so with popular systems of faith. Man by nature is a child of the devil. Goodness he hates. Sin is his natural element. By the constitution of his nature he is made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to evil. Even were he to try to please God, the very attempt would make him more hateful in the sight of God.

What a doctrine to preach to men who are to enter heaven by holiness! You are morally corrupt and impotent! Sin you cannot vanquish! Virtue you cannot acquire! Suppose that on that terrible morning which has indelibly inscribed, in characters of blood, Inkermann, on the page of history, the commander-in-chief and his officers had proclaimed throughout the ranks as the more numerous forces of the enemy appeared approaching—“We cannot fight: we are impotent: defeat is inevitable: to try is death,”—would it not have been the death-knell of our brave troops? But, instead of this, the soldiers were reminded of what their country expected, of what their duty demanded, and they were encouraged. Brave before, they become braver. Even cowards grow courageous. They feel every man a hero. And with the coolness, the courage, the determination, the bravery, of heroes, they encounter the formidable forces of the foe, and toil on till the victory is theirs. And not otherwise is it with the soldiers of the Cross, with all who are engaged in the moral warfare of life. As long as they are under the guidance of men who keep ringing in their ears the melancholy and dispiriting tale of their thorough corruption of heart and soul, and their consequent utter impotence, the world, the flesh, and Satan will for ever remain unsubdued, and man their helpless victim. But, instead of this, assure men of their inherent spiritual power, encourage them to do their best, to put forth their highest efforts in the service of virtue, and very different will be the result. Proclaim to them the gospel doctrine of their adequacy to the work whereunto God hath appointed them. “You can conquer if you will. You possess the power if you would but use it. Your impotence arises from indolence or ignorance. Be up and doing,—doing wisely and well, and the victory is yours.” And point to him who was the great Captain of our salvation on the field of duty,—the well-beloved of the Father; point to him, not as a God enacting a part (in which case, or any other allied thereto, his example necessarily loses its power), but, as the Gospel represents him, “the Son of Man”

“made perfect through sufferings,”—“in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin;” do this, and men are encouraged, their hearts are strengthened, their hopes brightened, and their hands nerved for any struggle duty may require,—feeling assured that under God they can do all things, inspired and strengthened by the example of Christ. And this does our Unitarianism,—in which, alas! it is a solitary exception among the religious systems of Christendom.

VI. In the last place, Christian Unitarianism is especially adapted to man while passing through the darker Passages of Life. You all know the severe charges that are preferred against our faith as a system to sustain and comfort the weary and heavy-laden, the children of affliction. It is conceded that ours may be a good enough religion for prosperity and joy, but it is pronounced utterly insufficient in seasons of deep sorrow. If any charge against our doctrines is wholly unfounded it is this charge. Thank God, they stand the test of the severest experience, and prove themselves all-sufficient to the heart that trusts them. If anywhere their superiority is eminently conspicuous, it is in life’s darkest and most trying scenes.

To the sinner, Unitarianism brings an actual salvation. To the conscience-stricken, smitten to the dust by a sense of guilt, and writhing in the agony of despair, even to such it comes, in the spirit of the Saviour, with tidings of great joy, revealing means of reconciliation which bring the sinner near to God without involving God in cruelty or injustice. True, it proclaims no impunity, no amnesty, for past offences. It does not arrest the righteous operations of divine retribution. At the same time, it shews us a path by which the lowest sunk in sin ultimately reach the bliss of heaven,—by repentance and newness of life. It teaches us that God the good Father’s arms are ever open to receive the penitent sinner,—that he is ever ready, without bribe or propitiation, to welcome his returning child. While an angel with a flaming sword guards the gates of blessedness against impenitent guilt, to the truly penitent the path is ever open, his efforts after amendment are encouraged, he is not repelled but entreated to return. “There is joy in heaven” over the sinner that repenteth. Thus teaches our Liberal Christianity, and thus it proclaims sure salvation to the conscience-stricken sinner.

To those who are passing through the fires of severe trial, calamity, and affliction, our doctrines are, in a high degree, strengthening and consoling. They assure us that, endure what we may, no enemy hath done it; that all things are under the absolute direction of our heavenly Father who is guided by love and wisdom ever, by caprice or malice never. Affliction, trial, calamity, are our lot, not because God hates us or delights in our sufferings, but because he loves us, and desires by these agencies to discipline us,—to purify us from the dross of sin that we may be prepared to dwell with him and his Christ in the kingdom of everlasting blessedness. We are confident that all things work together for good, and learn to “kiss the rod.” We are brought to feel that “the clouds” which seem charged with destruction “are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings”

on our head ; and to say from the heart, as the Saviour said, Father, “ thy will be done.”

“ Our Father knows what’s good and fit,
And wisdom guides his love ;
To his appointment we submit,
And every choice approve.”

In the hour of death our faith is especially sustaining. Death it deprives of its worst horrors. It does not represent death as the enemy of man, nor as a punishment, but as an event in man’s personal development, as natural as his birth. The soul immortal casting off its decaying habiliments of flesh enters the abodes of the immortals, its home on high, that its culture may be continued under more favourable circumstances ; that under the immediate care of the Great Physician its diseases may be healed and its health restored ; so that it may be enabled to serve God faithfully and lovingly, and enjoy him supremely. Yes, for the lowest sunk in sin we cherish the hope that, while they must bear the consequences of their transgressions, they shall yet come to render willing homage to God most high,—“ that God may be all in all.” Death is not our enemy : it is but “ nature’s entrance fee” to that better land, in which every soul shall approach nearer and nearer unto the perfection of its nature, and at length shall become one with God, even as Christ was. For the hour of death, then, our faith is full of hope, and consolation, and sustaining power. It, verily, dries the mourner’s cheek, gives courage to the soul trembling on the brink of eternity, and enables it to launch forth on that boundless ocean without terror, full of trust in a heavenly Father’s love.

Such, then, are some characteristics—indicated rather than unfolded—of Liberal Christianity as a law of life,—as a system of intellectual, spiritual, and practical influences ; rationalizing thought, strengthening faith, and enforcing virtue. Its doctrines, as unfolded in Scripture, satisfy every requirement of the reason, conscience, and heart. In God it reveals a tender Father ; in the Saviour a sympathizing brother ; in man, even when most degraded by sin, an immortal soul capable of endless improvement ; in a consecrated life, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit ; and in the future world, the fullest development of everything capable of development.

With such a faith and hope as Unitarianism implies, what might not be done by its professors ! The great errors and superstitions that, as a nightmare, press heavily upon men’s souls and destroy their spiritual health, could not, surely, long resist the faith we hold, were we but sufficiently earnest and judicious in its maintenance. Abroad, the Mahometan, the Jew, the Hindoo, would lend a more attentive ear to our doctrines than to those of orthodoxy. And at home, the heathen around us,—the untaught, the fallen, the degraded,—afford an eminently suitable field for the missionary efforts of a religious system so hopeful of man and so trustful of God. But one thing, alas ! is wanting. The engine is there—stately, beautiful, powerful ; and work in abundance to be done,—but the fire burns feebly. We want the requisite zeal.

May we attain this baptism of the Spirit,—this deep and holy earnestness, so that the faith we hold may justify its high claims by the blessedness of “ its fruits.”—Amen.

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